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Hold on there, senators

There may be good reason in some cases for rejecting presidential nominees but failure to pledge non-interest in high elective office should not be one of them.

Twice within the past few days, senators have urged nominees to promise they won't seek the vice presidential nomination next year. Senator Henry Jackson tried to extract such a pledge from Donald Rumsfeld, President Ford's nominee for secretary of defense, and Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield asked the same of George Bush, nominee for director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

As a job, the much-maligned vice presidency may not amount to a whole lot, but it still is the second highest office in the land and it frequently is a stepping stone to the presidency. To ask a citizen to forego any interest in it is akin to asking him to give up the vote.

It was particularly presumptuous of Senator Jackson to badger Mr. Rumsfeld about the matter. Following Mr. Jackson's line of thought, one

might well ask the senator to give up his interest in the presidency and stick to the job for which he was elected. Mr. Rumsfeld was right to refuse to be put in any such box.

In the case of Mr. Bush, the issue is not whether he would seek the vice presidential nomination but whether the CIA should be divorced from politics in general. The question is whether the CIA under Mr. Bush, with his political background, would have the independence to keep it free from White House tampering.

Mr. Bush is a politician and it is unfair to ask him to give up ambition for the nation's highest offices. Besides, there is no way to hold an official to such a pledge; politicians frequently deny any intention of seeking higher office and then wind up as candidates.

The best solution to the CIA controversy is for Mr. Bush to ask that his name be withdrawn and for the President to nominate a non-political professional to head the agency.